

## Candlelight Vigil of Protection and Prayer for the Muslim Community

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The Islamic Center stands on a corner about a block from the University of Arizona. There didn't seem to be much foot traffic, other than men arriving at the mosque to pray. They didn't seem to be afraid of us as they walked boldly up the sidewalk in ones and twos, smiling and returning our greetings, saying thank-you for being here tonight. I wondered how successful the Director of the Center had been in notifying their members that we would be there for the 6:45 PM "Prayer Hour." There were about fifteen of us, holding candles around a sign that said "Vigil of Protection for the Muslim Community." We didn't want to be intrusive. We only wanted to show our love and solidarity for them, and to try to give them a small sense of safety to come out and pray.

I don't think they trusted us entirely. Omar, the Director, came out and greeted us. He apologized for the absence of their women; they were too afraid. He said some had come at the noon hour, but not one showed up that night. It also seemed that the time he had told us to arrive was the end of the prayer hour, rather than the beginning, but at least six men had arrived while we were there.

Omar invited us to come in. The women, too, I asked, and he nodded. A man behind him shook his head and I wondered if Omar were doing something new, something daring. We followed Omar into the front room. I noticed the racks for shoes. Omar hesitated for a split second, as if he weren't sure what to ask of us, and I said "We need to take off our shoes, right?" I bent to the task as he slipped off his and told everyone else to do the same. Then he invited us into the prayer room, a large room divided about two thirds of the way from the front, but with an opening. Men were still seated on the blue carpet, hands held before them in prayer. We waited a few minutes. Then Omar led us into the front room. I wondered again if he was doing something daring, opening up the mosque in an effort to educate us, perhaps breaking rules in the effort. More than half of us were women and had not covered our heads.

We sat down and Omar asked if we would like to hear about their faith. Of course. So he began: "They say we are terrorists. This is not true." He told us of the five pillars of Islam and the five pillars of faith. He spoke for quite a while and I realized that he needed to say these things. He needed to tell us, the representatives of the "rest" of their religious American sisters and brothers, who they really were. "Everywhere they say we are terrorists," he repeated, several times. In my heart, I protested, before remembering that he was speaking of our society's continued portrayal of Muslims and Arabs as the bad guys -- in just about every movie you see, especially those about terrorists.

Omar said, "They say we are womanizers. This is not true." He explained their view of the role of women and the tradition of having up to four wives. I guessed that he what he meant by the word "womanizer" was really "misogynism," hatred of women. He said they respected their women, that they could hold jobs, and that once married, the man would not divorce the woman and leave her with her children and no income, like we do here in the United States. He

compared Muslim marriage to Christian or secular commitments outside of marriage. American men have far more girlfriends and unsupported children in their lives than Muslim men have wives.

All this time, at least five other Muslim men sat nearby, one right at the feet of Omar. They smiled at us and shook our hands as we took our leave. We plan to have Omar come to speak at our congregation in the next month or two. He is very glad to be asked. "I'm sorry our women were not here," he apologized again, and we said, "Maybe next week we can come at a different time." It was then that it occurred to me how frightening our request might have been to them: to have a group of strangers ask when their most popular prayer hour was; to have a group of strangers want to gather in front of their sacred space; to have a group of strangers say "don't be afraid." How would they know that we meant well? How would they know that we weren't planning an act of retaliation rather than an act of protection? They were far more brave than we were last night, but our coming together, our smiles, our candlelight of concern and support, our willingness to listen to their protests against the labels of hate pinned upon them by our society, our interest in hearing what they truly believe, all this is the transformation an act of faith creates. We are mending the world in this tiny way, the world of our own hearts and lives and those of our brothers and sisters. Next week, we will do it again.